

WORDS AND STONES

In Mezhibuzh, the hometown of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (founder of Chassidism, 1698–1760), two local residents were involved in a bitter dispute. One day, they were angrily shouting at each other in the local synagogue, when one of them cried out: “I’ll rip you to pieces with my bare hands!”

The Baal Shem Tov, who was in the synagogue at the time, told his disciples to form a circle, each taking the hand of his neighbour, and to close their eyes. Rabbi Israel himself closed the circle by placing his hands upon the shoulders of the two disciples who stood to his right and his left. Suddenly, the disciples cried out in fright: behind their closed eyelids they saw the angry man actually tearing his fellow apart, just as he had threatened!

Words are like arrows, says the Psalmist, and like smouldering coals. Like arrows, explains the Midrash, for a man stands in one place and his words wreak havoc on another’s life many miles away. And like a coal whose outer surface has been extinguished but whose interior remains aflame, so too do malevolent words continue to work their damage long after their external effect has evaporated.

Words kill in many ways. Sometimes they set in motion a chain of events that turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy; sometimes they are deflected off the object of their venom, to strike some innocent bystander; and sometimes they return like a boomerang to pursue their originator. By whatever route they travel, hateful words inevitably lead to hateful actions, possibly years or even generations after they are uttered. Human nature is such that thoughts strive to find expression in spoken words, and spoken words seek realization in deeds—often by circuitous paths that the original utterer of those words neither desired nor anticipated.

But the power of the word runs deeper than its potential to translate into action. Even if this potential is never realized, even if the spoken words never materialize in the “world of action,” they still exist in the higher, more spiritual “world of speech.” For man is not only a body, but also a soul; he is not only a physical being, but also a spiritual creature. On the physical plane, spoken words may be significant only as potential actions; in the soul’s reality, they *are* actual.

This is what the Baal Shem Tov wished to show his disciples by granting them a glimpse into the world of words inhabited by the souls of the two verbal combatants. He wanted them to understand that every word we utter is *real*, whether or not it comes to fruition in the “world of action” in which our physical self resides. On a higher, more spiritual plane of reality—a reality as real to our soul as the physical reality is to our physical self—our every word is as good (and as bad) as done.

The same is true, of course, in the positive sense: a word of praise, a word of encouragement is as good (and as *good*) as done in the spiritual reality of the soul. Even before a good word has yielded a good deed, it has already had a profound and lasting effect upon the inner state of ourselves and our world.

Yanki Tauber

4th April – **Metzora**

Shabbat Begins: 7.24pm
Shabbat Ends: 8.29pm